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'Strangest' Airline to Keep Busy

By Robert Kaylor
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BANGKOK—The United States is formally withdrawing from Indochina but Air America Inc., a company that can claim the title of the world's strangest airline, is staying on.

The company is a charter airline that has operated in various forms in various parts of Asia for the United States. In recent years, its highly paid civilian pilots have done the biggest part of their flying in Laos for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Earlier this year, when most of the U.S. war apparatus in Vietnam was being phased out, Air America was hiring more pilots. It had landed a contract to fly helicopters for the International Commission of Control and Supervision under the title of "ICCS Air Services."

The helicopters were former U.S. Army aircraft and the bills for the ICCS operation were believed paid by the U.S. government, with which Air America has special links.

Flying in Vietnam for the ICCS has started out to be as hazardous as flying in Laos, where 17 of the airline's American crewmen and a similar number of local employees have been killed in Communist attacks.

In recent weeks, three Air America crewmen and six passengers have been killed by Communist ground fire in South Vietnam.

Most civilian companies would quickly pack up and leave in the face of such war casualties, but Air America flies on. For the pilots, a big motivation is pay, which starts at about \$25,000 a year. In a typical 12-month period, 25 per cent of the company's pilots flying in Laos earned above \$40,000 each.

Air America once served as the model for a rather shady outfit called "Air Expensible" in the Terry and

the Pirates comic strip. But in real life, it has seen some adventures that rival anything that Terry ever found himself involved in.

Air America helicopters, based at Udorn in northeast Thailand along with the U.S. Air Force, fly CIA-sponsored guerrilla troops and war cargoes in Laos. Although it is technically in a noncombat role, Air America has carried the guerrillas on helicopter assaults on occasions when the Air Force refused to provide its jolly green giant helicopters for the job, citing danger from anti-aircraft fire.

Before the Laotian ceasefire went into effect in February, Air America pilots regularly flew in to evacuate wounded guerrillas while U.S. Air Force jets made strafing passes nearby.

According to well-informed sources, Air America helicopter pilots regularly flew into North Vietnam in the mid-1960s to support guerrilla operations there before the final ouster of pro-American troops from northeast Laos. The missions brought cash bonuses.

Hugh Grindy, a Washington-based executive who is Air America's president, traveled to the Laotian capital of Vientiane within the past several months to discuss the airline's postwar role there. Following his departure, a proposal was heard that Air America planes and pilots operate as before but under the name of the Laotian national airline.

All of this has led many people to believe that the company is nothing more than a front for the CIA. Officials of the company and U.S. intelligence sources deny it.

But there is ample evidence that Air America enjoys a relationship with the U.S. government that other contract airlines which operate in Southeast Asia do not have. The H-34 and Chinook helicopters and C-123, Caribou and C-130 transports flown by Air America are actually U.S. Army Air Force and Navy planes leased to the airline under a special arrangement.

Whatever its real status, Air America is also big business. Financial authorities list its sales as about \$50 million a year. It operates some 130 aircraft in Asia. It has a total payroll of about 8,500 persons, ranking it in size between National and Braniff Airlines in the United States.

Air America traces its ancestry back to Civil Air Transport, an airline started after World War II by Gen. Claire Chennault of Flying Tiger fame.

American pilots of Civil Air Transport dropped supplies into the besieged French fortress of Dien-bienphu during the first Indochina War.

*File
Sale*

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